

Don't Be A Victim: Protect yourself against Cervical Cancer

By Ambassador Beatrice W. Welters

Every year, cervical cancer claims the lives of an estimated 275,000 women across the world. Cervical cancer leaves children without mothers, husbands without wives, and employers without employees. One of my recent initiatives as the United States Ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago has been to initiate a Council on Women's Outreach. This Council is composed of female Trinbagonian leaders with a passion for improving the well-being of their countrymen and women. And today I'm pleased to announce the first item on our agenda: fighting preventable deaths due to cervical cancer.

Like the rest of the world, the number of lives lost to cervical cancer in Trinidad and Tobago is too large for a disease that's often treatable if caught early. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that Trinidad and Tobago has a population of 533,000 women ages 15 years and older who are at risk of developing cervical cancer. According to the WHO, some 125 women in T&T are diagnosed with cervical cancer every year, and 93 die from the disease. The Ambassador's Council on Women's Outreach is focusing on educating women so that T&T sees zero cervical cancer deaths a year.

The cervix is the lower part of the uterus (womb) that opens into the vagina. Cervical cancer usually begins with abnormal changes in the cells that line the cervix. It can take many years for these abnormal changes to turn into cervical cancer, and the early stages of cervical cancer often exhibit no signs or symptoms. Once symptoms do develop, they can include abnormal vaginal bleeding, bleeding and pain when something comes into contact with the cervix (such as during sexual intercourse), vaginal discharge that is tinged with blood, and pain during urination.

The Human Papillomavirus (HPV), the most common sexually transmitted disease, is the cause of almost all cases of cervical cancer. HPV is actually a group of more than 100 related viruses that can infect cells on the surface of the skin, genitals, anus, mouth and throat. HPV is easily transmittable, and while many women may have the infection, most women's bodies are able to fight HPV before it turns into cancer. In some women, however, the infection lasts and can cause certain cancers, including cervical cancer.

There are a number of factors and behaviors that can put women at risk of getting HPV and, consequently, cervical cancer. Doctors do not know why, but HPV is

most commonly found in women under age 30. Women who start having sex at a young age are more likely to get and stay infected with HPV. Having multiple sex partners also increases the risk of contracting HPV. Women whose partners have multiple sex partners, or whose partners are not circumcised also have an elevated risk. It is important to remember that even women with only one sex partner can contract HPV and develop cancer. Shame and stigmatization should never affect our mothers, sisters, and friends who battle this disease.

HPV and cervical cancer can be uncomfortable or even taboo subjects, but we cannot allow such discomfort to aid cancer's ability to claim more women. There are easy steps that women can take to ensure that they prevent cervical cancer or catch it early enough to be treated. Yearly Pap tests are the most effective way of diagnosing abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix. A Pap test is a painless procedure where a doctor uses a small spatula and brush to examine the cervix and collect sample cells. The Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society recommends that all women should begin Pap tests and regular screenings from the start of sexual activity or at 18 years. The Pap test should be done once every year, but beginning at 30, women who have had three normal Pap test results in a row may choose to be tested less often.

There are other ways you can reduce your risk. The HPV vaccine is available in Trinidad and Tobago and it offers strong, long-lasting protection against certain strains of HPV that can cause cervical cancer. The vaccine is recommended for girls and women between ages 9 and 25, who have not been exposed to HPV. The Ministry of Health recently announced a laudable effort to provide free vaccines to 60,000 girls. In addition to the HPV vaccine and regular Pap tests, women can also reduce their risk of cervical cancer by practicing safe sex (using condoms) and not smoking.

The Ambassador's Council on Women's Outreach will be embarking on a series of educational lectures to encourage the women of Trinidad and Tobago to be proactive about their health. By educating ourselves, reducing HPV risk factors, and getting regular screenings, we can move toward achieving a generation free from cervical cancer.

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